

## Pipeline fines turn Whatcom County greener

\$22 million to enhance area



*THEN AND NOW: At left, Lindsay Seefried of Bellingham digs a hole for a tree near Whatcom Creek at Yew and Iowa streets on March 10, 2003, as part of efforts to reforest a part of Whatcom Falls Park burned by a 1999 pipeline explosion and fire. At right, seven years after the explosion, is the top of the walkway seen in the photo at left. The volunteer effort brought together nearly 100 people to plant more than 1,000 trees and plants in the park. SARAH GALBRAITH THE BELLINGHAM HERALD*

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### KATIE N. JOHANNES THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Tucked behind a business park and between neighborhood dead-end streets, streams roll through bending channels and pool around downed logs. Weather-bleached snags rise out of the little urban forest in the middle of Bellingham. The eastern faces of the tall, dead trees are black, reminders of the 1999 gasoline pipeline explosion and fire that took three young lives and scorched more than a mile of the Whatcom Creek corridor, from Whatcom Falls Park nearly to Interstate 5.

Seven years after the disaster, the results of more than \$22 million in federal penalties reserved for environmental improvements, parks and open spaces are becoming visible in Bellingham and Whatcom County.

The money is a portion of more than \$188 million paid by fuel companies for criminal and civil settlements with the government and victims' families.

It doesn't include the emergency cleanup and restoration paid for by the pipeline companies immediately after the explosion, a number the fuel companies were unable to estimate.

The money for restoration work was tied up in court proceedings for years, after Olympic Pipe Line Co. filed for bankruptcy in 2003 and settled in 2004.

The city didn't see its first payment until June 17, 2005, and it didn't break ground on its largest project — nearly \$1 million of stream and habitat restoration at the end of Meador Avenue behind Haskell Business Park — until this summer, on July 15.

Clare Fogelsong, Bellingham's environmental resources manager in the Public Works Department, said keeping a portion of the money in the local area and using it for environmental improvements have been priorities since the disaster.

While the environmental work doesn't address the pain suffered by the victims' families, the work was intended to help the larger community.

"We understood the importance of making the community whole," he said. "It made up for inconvenience and damage to the community psyche, and the enjoyment of our environment."

Fuel companies paid for emergency restoration work in areas heavily damaged by the explosion. And burned hillsides already have grown thick with trees planted by Washington Conservation Corps crews and volunteers.

But most of the money allocated to restoration projects and open space has gone outside the areas most heavily damaged by the explosion. It went to areas suffering the effects of urbanization and neglect, and areas that property owners want to save from development.

"At the time it seemed like kind of a stretch to use some of the money for properties out in the county," Fogelsong said. "My opinion was that the lion's share should come back to the city and the Whatcom Creek area."

Shannon Sullivan, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Ecology in Bellingham, an agency in charge of administering about \$2.5 million in pipeline penalties, said Ecology feels comfortable with the way the money has been applied.

"It was to be used for restoration or enhancement of property either damaged or within that vicinity, and for spill prevention preparedness," she said.

From Ecology's perspective, Whatcom County is within the vicinity of the explosion — the larger community can enjoy those enhancements, Sullivan said.

